

CONGRESSIONAL QUARTERLY

House Appropriators Scold Education Secretary on Budget Request

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By Libby George, CQ Staff

The chairman of the House Appropriations Committee made it clear Tuesday he had little use for the Bush administration's education budget, and warned Education Secretary Margaret Spellings that she had better prepare to compromise on spending priorities.

At a hearing before the Labor-HHS-Education Subcommittee, which he also chairs, David R. Obey, D-Wis., told Spellings, "I'm not about to waste the time of this committee, or of this Congress ... with a needless eight-month squabble over numbers if the president simply intends to stick by his original budget, not changing a dollar."

Spellings seemed little moved by Obey's scolding. In brief remarks about the education budget, she focused on administration initiatives Congress is almost certain to reject, including robust funding of the embattled Reading First program, \$300 million in vouchers for students to transfer out of failing schools and an end to 44 programs under the Education Department.

"Tradeoffs have been made, with a preference for [funding] large programs," Spellings said, noting that 27 of those proposed for elimination were previously funded at \$25 million or less. "The philosophy of this administration has been to emphasize larger-scale programs . . . that have a lot of latitude and flexibility for schools districts."

Bush's \$59.2 billion discretionary funding request for the Education Department is a 3.5 percent increase over fiscal 2008 levels, but includes perennial requests to eliminate popular higher education grant programs and fund vouchers for school choice. And despite a \$406 million increase in Title I funding - the main source of funds to help schools implement the 2002

education law known as No Child Left Behind (PL 107-110) - the overall request for the law is, according to Democrats, more than \$85 billion below authorized levels.

The administration approach was almost universally criticized by members of the Labor, Health and Human Services, Education and Related Agencies subcommittee - including Republicans. They slammed the secretary for eliminating programs that were important to their districts, for choosing not to fully fund the 2002 education law at its authorized level and for continuing to propose programs that Congress has repeatedly refused to fund.

Montana Republican Denny Rehberg said the administration proposal was fueled by either "misunderstanding or contempt," and said it would have a catastrophic impact on the Native American students in his state.

"I don't know what you guys are smoking over there, but it's just not working," Rehberg said, promising to break with his party, if necessary, with a vote to override a possible veto of the panel's eventual appropriations bill. "Maybe a new administration will get it."

Obey told Spellings: "What I would appreciate is that you take back to the White House and OMB a simple question: Do you want to work things out, or do they want us to wait until a new president is in office who will act like an adult when it comes to negotiating?"

Spellings said that she was "certainly carrying your message to the White House and to my colleagues at OMB," but the funding request would suggest that the administration has already noted - and disregarded - Congress' priorities on education spending.

Only ranking subcommittee Republican James T. Walsh of New York seemed willing to speak up for the administration's proposal. He told Spellings that the budget "makes choices and it set priorities, and I appreciate that."